



# Max Kusters

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## **Mario**

This is In Context, the podcast where we delve deeper into educational research. I am Mario de Jonge, educational researcher at ICLON Leiden University. And I'm sitting here today with Max Kusters. He is a PhD student at ICLON. And he has a research interest in teacher agency and more specifically the impact of teacher agency on teaching and learning in higher education. Is that correct?

## **Max**

That's correct. And then particularly in universities.

## **Mario**

The first question, you might see this coming, but what is teacher agency?

## **Max**

Teacher agency has a well-rooted base in the literature, but it's also a bit divergent still. But the core is that teachers have the ability to make choices, informed choices, and can influence work practices in order to improve education.

## **Mario**

So you think it's a necessary prerequisite for being able to improve education to have teacher agency?

## **Max**

Yeah, I think so. Because teachers who are able to influence work practices on well-informed choices and considerations. And also can get colleagues in a position or can motivate them to innovate education. I think that's a prerequisite.

## **Mario**

That's very, very clear, I guess. And then my next question would be: what is the status of teacher agency as it is right now? So do you feel like there's enough attention for teacher agency with regard to the professionalization of teachers in higher education? Or is it still something that's still something that doesn't receive the proper attention that it should?

## **Max**

I think there's a lot of attention in that it's easily said nowadays. People talk about agency or

being agentic. But in my opinion, that's more related to ownership or autonomy. So if people act and work autonomously, change or innovate or improve their courses, people say that is agency. Or want to develop, are involved and engaged in educational innovations. I think that's more the ownership part. So it is definitely recognized as a word, as a concept, but there's strong definition. And what we understand in teacher agency I think there's a difference. There's a difference and also some work to do.

**Mario**

Yeah, so if I understand correct, so the ownership is part of it, but it's not all of it. So it's more than just revising your own teaching, but it's more than that. Maybe you can elaborate a bit more on that, because I think I am one of these people that have a narrow conception of teacher agency.

**Max**

Yeah, I think ownership is definitely important in achieving agency because you have to be able and willing to change matters in education. And when it comes to agency, achieving agency, then it's about well-considered choices, but also having multiple options in any given situation. That's the definition by Mark Priestley and Biesta and the ecological approach on teacher agency. So it's more than just feel that the course is yours or feeling like being a teacher or that you are able to influence matters. That's maybe even more to self-efficacy. And that's still not all teacher agency, but important parts.

**Mario**

I'm going to move on here because you do have a recent publication in *Teaching and Teacher Education* about this particular subject entitled 'University lecturers as change agents: How do they perceive their professional agency?'. You published this together with Roeland van der Rijst, Arjen de Vetten and Wilfried Admiraal. And for this study, you interviewed 35 teachers. So this is a qualitative study. And you asked them to share their experiences regarding their agency. Maybe you can shortly elaborate on what you found. What did you get back from the teachers and what were your conclusions based on their experiences?

**Max**

Yeah. Definitely. We asked them about their agency without calling it agency because of the things we just mentioned. So we used the framework of the Finnish researcher, Katja Vähäsantanen. Probably not a good pronunciation, but it's in the article. And she developed a framework on professional agency, also among academics. She found three categories, three dimensions: influencing at work, developing work practices, and negotiating professional identity.

**Mario**

So this is not necessarily in the realm of teacher professionalization, but more in a different setting, if I understand correct.

**Max**

Yeah, exactly. So it's more on the profession. So she validated also with nurses and firemen, if I recall correctly. So it's more a generic model of professional agency. And we tried to find indicators of professional agency in the university teaching practice. So make it more applicable to our context. We did find indicators in those three dimensions as well.

**Mario**

Well, thank God.

**Max**

That was a good thing. But also that the indicators were very context-specific and context-dependent. So we think, or we thought we had a problem with using a generic model to say something about someone's agency: 'you are agentic'. So we were thinking more of: you can achieve agency in specific situations, and it can differ over situations. So that was quite one of the most important findings for us, and also that we moved a bit to the ecological model.

**Mario**

So if I understand correctly, there were some differences between the more generic approach of the model and the model specific to the university context. Is that correct in stating that in that way?

**Max**

Yeah. Also because Vähäsantanen investigated the profession of being an academic, so that's including the research tasks and the administrative tasks and the teaching tasks. So we focused primarily on the teaching tasks. So we asked in the interviews with the 35 lecturers, what are your experiences of influencing and developing in university teaching? And so we found those indicators, context-specific indicators, and we were looking for a model or a framework that is useful for capturing the dynamic concept of teacher agency.

**Mario**

So actually the findings made you decide to change the conceptual model that you were using or the framework that you were using for understanding teacher agency at the university level. Is that correct?

**Max**

Yeah. So looking at teacher agency, it's more a dynamic concept than a static generic concept.

**Mario**

And so that's the more the... What did you call it? The ecological model of teacher agency. And maybe you can say something about this particular model. So what are the characteristics of this model that make it especially suitable for investigating teacher agency in higher education?

**Max**

Yeah. So also it's based on three dimensions in which they state that behavior, or agentic behavior is established because of histories, professional histories, but also personal histories. That's the iterational dimension. The projective dimension is: if you have professional short and long-term goals. So why do you do what you do? And in between the practical evaluative dimension is the available current resources, personal beliefs, so what is happening in the moment. Together, that makes the options that you have, and choosing between those options or considerations, that should be agentic behavior. So achieving agency because of the ecological model informed by the histories, goals, and current resources.

**Mario**

Exactly. So, if I understand correct, so the teachers that you interviewed for your study were all at Leiden University?

**Max**

You mean for the first study? So they were all from Leiden University in the first study, and now with the ecological model, so that's a second or third study. Yeah. That's broader.

**Mario**

And these studies have not been published yet. You're still working on writing up the results. So right now, we've been talking mostly about your research on teacher agency, but you're also a teacher yourself. So I thought it might be a suitable, I mean, it would be a missed opportunity not to ask about your own agency or your experiences with teacher agency. Obviously, you have some more insight, maybe you are more aware. So are there certain things that you do based on the literature or based on your own your own experiences with the teachers that you interviewed to, well, use your agency in practice?

**Max**

So I'm very in the beginning of the teaching in academia. I did a little teaching, and what I noticed there is that I like it that there are some materials beforehand I can study. And then make it my own story. But real improving and innovation teaching is not what I am doing at the moment. Because I'm learning to get the basics right. So I think agency has also something to do with experience. And in the new minor we have, the Living Education Lab, that's where I had to make two lectures myself. And that is where I experienced more agency, because I was really thinking about what are the good didactics, for example, and instructions and what is interesting literature to teach. And so I think I'm more, as in terms of agency, I'm a bit in the... see what is available, instead of find new ways. And during my BKO, university teaching qualification, there I experienced more agency because I had to make a portfolio. And one of the requirements was that you had to include the student evaluations. But my name wasn't mentioned by the students. So I didn't have any student evaluations. So I went to the students themselves and asked for qualitative feedback and included that in my portfolio. And that was approved by the committee. So that was a way of working around the requirements, but with good considerations, I thought. And they luckily also.

**Mario**

Yeah, it sounds like it. So basically you did your own evaluation of your teaching, and you decided on the way of doing that in a way that gave you good ideas for maybe improving on your education and reflecting on it.

**Max**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Mario**

But I want to thank you so much for joining us for this podcast. I at least have a better understanding of teacher agency. And of course, I'm hoping our listeners as well. And I'm hoping you enjoyed our chat together today. Thank you so much, Max.

**Max**

Thank you very much.

**Mario**

This was In Context. Editing by Carla Den Hartog, music by Robert Loeber. We thank you very much for listening. Do you want to stay up to date? Then subscribe to our podcast. And of course, sharing is very much appreciated.